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A fitting tribute

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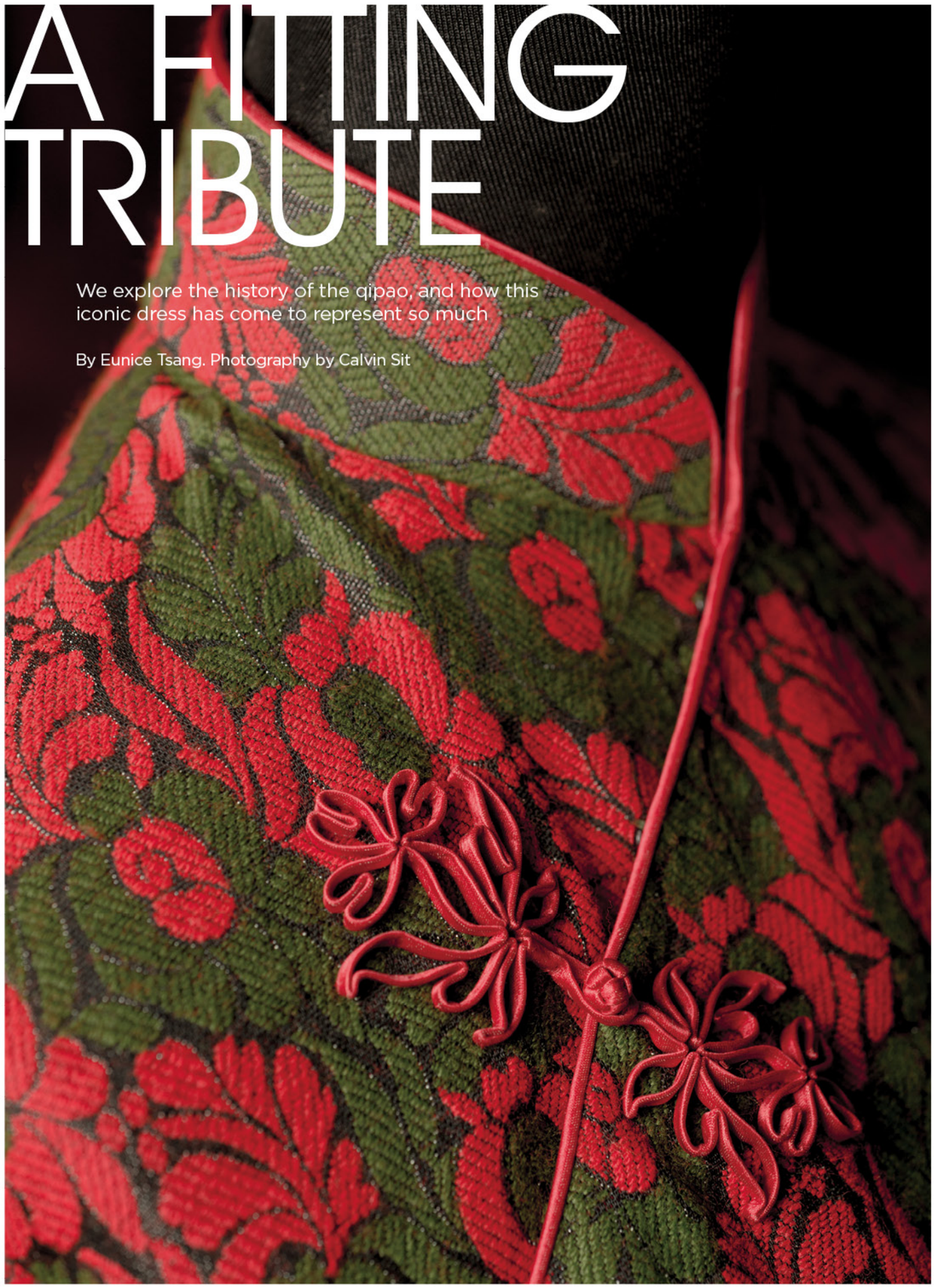

We explore the history of the qipao, and how this iconic dress has come to represent so much

By Eunice Tsang. Photography by Calvin Sit

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>
> Ashley Ng
> Curator

For a century the qipao has captivated hearts – an icon of feminine elegance and sophistication, it is both flirtatious and provocative. In Chinese cinema, no muse is perfect without a body-hugging qipao. From Nancy Kwan's flirtatious red hot qipao in *The World of Suzie Wong*, a 60s film that launched a thousand qipaos, to the 23 exquisite qipaos the willowy Maggie Cheung dons in Wong Kar Wai's arthouse classic *In the Mood for Love*, the unique garment is undoubtedly the epitome of Chinese femininity.

In September, HKDI presented "Orient Beauty", an exhibition to display the significance of this cultural treasure, and to prompt students' passion for the disappearing craft of qipao-making. The exhibition space is thoughtfully designed to create an immersive atmosphere, as if stepping back in time. Overhead hangs a large light installation, made of hundreds of plastic red lamps that are commonly found in local markets. Bathed in the warm light are various items from the past – a Singer sewing machine working on a vintage fabric, an old wooden Petrel radio and replicas of fashion magazines for visitors to flip through. Surrounding the objects are 20 qipaos displayed chronologically, dating from the 1920s to present day. They are treasures from Ashley Ng's personal collection, the curator and lecturer for the Department of Design Foundation Studies at HKDI. "As a designer and educator, I have the responsibility to tell the new generation what happened in the old days," Ng explains, "What is Chinese heritage and identity? How do we position ourselves in the international market? What is the scope that a Hong Kong designer should have?" These are the questions that Ng hopes to raise through "Orient Beauty".

The title of the exhibition exudes a sense of nostalgia, harking back to the colonial period of

Hong Kong. Influences of Western aesthetics can be found in almost every object in the show. Shanghai Girls posters from the Republican era of 1920s depict demure models in trendy qipaos of the day. Originally hand-painted, these advertisements are now regarded as works of art on their own. Like contemporary adverts, these images emphasise the models' feminine gestures and beauty trends – rosy cheeks, red lips, "new-moon-shaped" eyebrows, and Westernised permed hair. Exhibition boards behind the qipaos provide concise historical background and interesting facts, like specific qipao tailors who were masters of the trade. The respected tailor, Leung Long Gwong, has devoted his entire life to creating qipao. One of his fans was Wong Kar Wai, who continually invited him to create the many stunning limelight-stealing qipaos in his films, including the first transparent collar for *In the Mood for Love* and a flamboyant jewel-encrusted qipao for Zhang Ziyi in *2046*. Master tailors like

Leung take the qipao to the next level, elevating it to haute couture.

The evolution of the qipao reflects the intriguing history of China. From its Manchurian roots as a long, billowing dress, it has undergone a series of changes throughout the century. The 1930s and 1940s are regarded as the golden era of the qipao. Influenced by Art Deco and Western fashion trends from the 20s, the dress was altered to a slim fit cutting to show off the slender, feminine body. It was also elongated with a low waistline that echoed the Art Deco flapper fashion of America. Far from being conservative, the qipao explored various new fabrics, especially thin ones like satin, crêpe and gauze. Appearing almost transparent, it was a cheeky play of peekaboo, while maintaining

its gracefulness. The sleeves were much shortened to reveal feminine porcelain arms. It also acted as a step forward in the rising equality of women, as the qipao evolved into a simple one-piece, and its famous slit on both sides of the dress emerged so that women could move more freely. The signature stiff, upright collar was replaced with a fun variety – turndown collars, V-necks and even ruffle collars. As seen in the replicas of vintage fashion magazines in the exhibition, highly-stylised models paired the qipao with Western style fur coats, luxuriously long jackets and dazzling jewellery. Inspired by American and European modern art, qipao patterns became bolder and abstract, the most popular designs being stripes and geometric shapes.

In the 1950s, there was a wave of immigrants from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Shanghai being one of the fashion capitals of the world at that time, meant that there was an influx of expert tailors, bringing along their precious experience to the city. The result was that the 50s and 60s became Hong Kong's gilded age, as reflected by the vibrant, sexy designs of the qipao. The excitement from the sexual revolution in the United States of the 60s spread globally, reaching Hong Kong. The hem of the qipao raised alluringly above the knee and adopted a much more body-hugging cut, mischievously emphasising the silhouette of the female body. The most iconic film of the era was probably *The World of Suzie Wong*. In the film, British-Hong Kong mix Nancy Kwan stars as a local prostitute who falls in love with an American architect, played by William Holden. It's hard to forget her long black hair and voluptuous figure accentuated by the risqué blood-red qipao, which turned her into a sex siren overnight. Such was the fascinating and paradoxical garment – being simultaneously a demonstration of female emancipation, and a leading cause for the sexual objectification of women.

Nowadays, although the qipao is no longer a common sight on the street, it refuses to be ignored. With variations appearing in Chinese weddings, important dinners, significant events and nostalgic contemporary films, it is evident that the dress remains highly relevant to this day.